

Human Duality, Moral Transformation, and the Vietnam War in *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket*

Tatiana Prorokova

University of Vienna, Austria.

Abstract

This article examines the representation of the Vietnam War in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). It contends that along with the directors' attempts to portray the Vietnam War, and specifically U.S. intervention in it, both Coppola and Kubrick deal with the issues of human duality and moral transformation that every soldier inevitably undergoes in war. Focusing on the questions of war, morality, and masculinity, this article outlines the problem of personal and collective ethic change as it is displayed in the two cinematic examples.

Keywords: Vietnam War, human duality, moral transformation, *Apocalypse Now*, *Full Metal Jacket*.

Introduction

The United States has a long military history. U.S. involvement in the Spanish-American War in 1898 marked the beginning of U.S. active military presence in conflicts worldwide. The country's major interventions that took place throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries include World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the First Gulf War, the Balkan War, the Afghanistan War, and the Iraq War. U.S. participation in each of these conflicts has been widely discussed in various cultural media. While all these discussions contribute to one's understanding of war in general and of specific military conflicts in particular, *cinematic* representations of war deserve special attention. Film's distinct peculiarity—to *visualize* war, imitating war environments, the feelings of the participants, victories of some, and the failures of others—indeed, makes this medium unique when it comes to portraying war. Every war film attempts to tell a certain truth about a conflict. One of such truths is, of course, the impact that a military experience can have on war participants. From unusual geographic environments, to the first kill, to the problem of veteran's reintegration in society, film has widely illustrated some of the most intricate issues related to war, attempting to clarify the complex philosophy of war to its viewers. Focusing exclusively on the Vietnam War, the drastic military failure of the United States, and its representation in film, specifically in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), this article discusses the problem of moral transformation that soldiers arguably experience in *every* war. The explorations of human psychology that are vivid in the two cinematic examples not only reveal the ethical hardship of

being a soldier but also reinforce the tragedy of *Vietnam* itself, criticizing U.S. involvement and the political decisions made during the war.

Among U.S. major interventions of the twentieth century, the country's participation in the Vietnam War is, indeed, the most controversial one. The long history of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia started as early as 1959 when the U.S. "install[ed] in the south a terrorist regime" (Chomsky 29) that within two years murdered around 70,000 Viet Congs. Later, there was direct involvement, and in 1961-1962 the U.S. bombed South Vietnamese villages, which would lead millions of people to camps where they would not be able to support guerrilla forces (29). Therefore, already in 1961, the escalation of the conflict had begun, and the United States fought against North Vietnam till 1973. Scholars claim that the Vietnam War was significant in terms of U.S. military history; yet the intervention also affected many families and neighborhoods in the United States and made this war an integral part of American *culture*, where "'Vietnam' has become [...] an *unavoidable* word" (Berg and Rowe 2; emphasis added).

The bloody and fierce experience in the Vietnam War left an indelible mark in American history. John Hellmann refers to the U.S. participation in that conflict as well as to its aftermath as "a collective American trauma" (174). Already during the war but especially since the end of the 1970s, the Vietnam War became one of the most popular themes in American cinema and literature. Many texts attempted to reflect the military events and show the role of the Americans in the war. This tendency aptly proves Owen Gilman's speculation that "the legacy of the Vietnam War will extend [...] challenging American life for decades with cautionary stories about the fragility of certainties from the past" (231-32).

For the nation that "had previously built [its] history out of a handful of operative myths and symbols," it was impossible to "reduce the Vietnam War to any single, comprehensive theme or meaning" (Gilman 232). American cinema is one of those media that tackle the problem of the Vietnam War attempting to reveal the multisided nature of the conflict. The films that to various degrees deal with the war include: *A Yank in Viet-Nam* (1964), *To the Shores of Hell* (1966), *The Green Berets* (1968), *Hail, Hero!* (1969), *The Visitors* (1972), *Forced Entry* (1973), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *The Boys in Company C* (1978), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Purple Hearts* (1984), *Platoon* (1986), *Hamburger Hill* (1987), *Casualties of War* (1989), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), *Tigerland* (2000), *Faith of My Fathers* (2005), *The Veteran* (2006), *Across the Universe* (2007), and many more. Certainly, in film, truth can sometimes be conflicted; yet, focusing on personal stories and revealing moral hardships that direct and indirect participants faced in that war, these films attempt to reconstruct the socio-cultural atmosphere of the conflict, ultimately helping younger generations understand better that ferocious war. The issue of soldiers' moral transformation caused by the Vietnam War is reflected in most of these films; yet this article focuses on *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket* to examine these overtly surreal contributions to the Vietnam movie genre made by two of the U.S.' most distinguished film directors: Francis Ford Coppola and Stanley Kubrick.

1. Moral Ambiguity in *Apocalypse Now*

Hellmann contends that one of the most “ambitious” films that sharpened people’s interest in the Vietnam War is Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (171). The scholar continues, claiming that *Apocalypse Now* is the example of an “epic human drama” (172) and it is deservedly reckoned as a classic of the genre. To corroborate his assumption, Hellmann states that Coppola managed to “explore Vietnam on the fundamental level of American cultural myth” (173). Moreover, the scholar argues:

The journey of the main character deep into the wilderness of Vietnam is a journey by the idealized American hero deep into his inner nature, long since projected upon Vietnam, to confront his traumatized mythic values. While disparate in texture and theme [...] [the film] render[s] Vietnam into a nightmare journey of the American hero through an inverted landscape of American myth and dream. (173)

In turn, I claim that *Apocalypse Now* is more concerned with an American journey in the unknown landscape and, to borrow from Hellmann, with the “journey into the self,” (192) rather than with the hardships of war. Judy Lee Kinney argues that the film failed to provoke sufficient emotional response from the audience; the scholar refers to the words of a Vietnam War veteran: “I don’t like movies about Vietnam ‘cause I don’t think that they are prepared to tell the truth. *Apocalypse Now* didn’t tell the truth. It wasn’t real” (157). One can speculate that the film, indeed, does not show the war as is; yet through the surreal representation of the Vietnam War it successfully explores the psychological side of a soldier’s self, in the end revealing the dark side of the American mission and thus offering a significant cultural interpretation of U.S. intervention in Vietnam.

The issues of morality and amorality are crucial for the Vietnam movie genre. In *Apocalypse Now*, the audience observes Captain Willard (Martin Sheen) killing Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando) in the final scene, taking his place and thus symbolically adopting the dark personality of Kurtz. Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* touches upon this issue, too. It can be noticed in a number of scenes: for example, when Pvt. Joker (Matthew Modine) joins the other marines to beat up sleeping Pvt. Pyle (Vincent D’Onofrio)—Joker’s strokes are the heaviest; or in one of the most famous scenes in the film—the sniper incident—when Animal Mother (Adam Baldwin) wants to leave the wounded sniper to die suffering, Joker eventually kills her, thus performing an act of mercy. Human duality and moral transformation are the issues that both Coppola and Kubrick investigate in their films, trying to reveal the dark innate aspects of human nature that become most apparent in war.

Saul Steier argues that *Apocalypse Now* “attempts to be the definitive film about the war in all its confusion, about its madness, its consequences for those who were involved, and about the political and moral dilemmas and contradictions which it forced into the open” (114). Both Lawrence Suid and Thomas Doherty refer to *Apocalypse Now* as the “light at the end of the tunnel” (Suid 32; Doherty, “*Apocalypse Now Redux*” 30), and this is probably the main

characteristic that distinguishes the film from the real war. I contend that Coppola chooses to portray a relatively “good” Vietnam in his film because the director is not so much interested in the war itself. Rather, as Suid claims, Coppola investigates the nature of a human being, where “good” and “evil” are inalienable parts (32). Therefore, *Apocalypse Now* is a film whose main task is not to articulate the issues of fortitude and courage, on the one hand, and cowardice, on the other (which often become the key trajectories in war films); but rather Coppola’s vision of the war which goes beyond these traditional representations (32).

The main character in *Apocalypse Now*, Captain Benjamin L. Willard, receives an order to go up the Nung River, to Cambodia, and find Colonel Walter E. Kurtz who went mad and now has his own “kingdom” somewhere in the jungles filled with troops of natives. It is during this journey that the audience sees the surreal world of war’s horrors. It is also during the journey that one realizes that Willard does not differ from Kurtz whom he is on the track of. Mark J. Lacy even claims that Willard is a reflection of Kurtz (626). Both characters are not just accustomed to ferocity—they are literally obsessed with it. However, it is only in the course of the journey that we understand how “war and acts of violence become part of the soldier’s construction of identity” (626). Indeed, Willard needs war and especially the enemy to vent brutality that is characteristic of him (626). Otherwise, his “bad side” would simply swallow him up from within. This is what the viewers can distinctly observe at the beginning of the film when they get to know Willard as a veteran who finds himself in a hotel room, drinking, hallucinating, and slowly going insane. He is both physically and emotionally unable to be on a peaceful territory, where his evil side is especially noticeable. This issue is also briefly reflected in the actions of Lt. Col. Bill Kilgore (Robert Duvall), whose very name, consisting of the words “kill” and “gore,” signifies the brutality that the man embodies. The audience first witnesses Lt. Col. Kilgore throwing cards onto the dead Vietnamese and calling them names and, only a moment later, helping a severely wounded Vietnamese soldier, allowing him to drink out of his own flask because this soldier is now a prisoner of war.

Coppola is obviously interested in demonstrating the paradoxical aspects of human behavior in war; but in doing so the filmmaker also provides the viewer with a socio-cultural commentary on the war, explaining the atrocities with the innate violence that is characteristic of human beings. Does it mean then that the intervention was carried out because without war and, hence, without the opportunity to vent their fury, American soldiers would go insane? But, if this is true, how is one to respond to good actions of Americans in the Vietnam War? In his analysis of Peter Davis’s documentary film *Hearts and Minds* (1974) that deals with the Vietnam War, Peter Biskind argues that the documentary becomes “unproductive” if the only thing the audience grasps is that Americans are “just plain bad” (32). And although, according to Biskind, the film explicitly speaks about all the flaws of Americans, he states that “they [American soldiers] were conscripted into a war not their own and made to like it” (32). It is, therefore, crucial to understand that it was *the war*, to specify, its politics and brutality, that uncovered the evil side of some of the American soldiers.

Numerous philosophers talk about “the treatment of good/evil as a duality wired into the intrinsic order of things” (Connolly 366), and I suggest employing this approach to understand the transformation of a soldier. While human duality and the revelation of one’s darkness, sinfulness, and corruption—the problem that was of particular interest to philosophers, scholars, and authors since the times of Dark Romanticism—can, indeed, be considered innate peculiarities of human beings, duality and moral transformation are doubtlessly most apparent in various extreme situations, among which is war. As war films have already proved to their viewers, the newcomers are very often ordinary young men whose morality is not questioned. Later, *war* teaches them that in order to survive they must forget mercy and compassion and turn into so-called killing machines. Therefore, my assumption is that even if, as Suid puts it, there are two sides of human nature (32), it is indisputable that war foregrounds and reinforces the evil one. Thus, moral corruption is by no means a specific trait of American soldiers, but rather it is an inevitable part of *every* individual involved in war. To borrow from Lacy:

Far from constructing the other as the source of evil, Coppola is exploring the tactics that leads the soldiers to deny any sense of moral responsibility for the violence around them. Vietnam becomes a space where men like Kilgore can explore the libidinization of technology and bodies (through helicopters, female bodies, and surfboards), enjoying a fantasy of control and mastery of the territory and its people. Coppola is exploring the technics of abstractification, of the technological disassembly of the self. (627)

Another thoughtful observation is made by Steier who claims that in *Apocalypse Now* Coppola’s stance is “to blame everyone and therefore no one for the horrors of Vietnam,” and it is presumably because the director believes that war provokes moral degradation of everyone who partakes; that is why the main characters of *Apocalypse Now* are insane (115). In other words, it is inaccurate to label American or Vietnamese soldiers as good or bad ones because war makes *everyone* evil and mad—this is the main message of *Apocalypse Now*. Any feeble attempt to break this rule, for instance, by Lt. Col. Kilgore’s willingness to help a dying Vietnamese drink, eventually fades: later the audience hears him saying, “I love the smell of napalm in the morning” (Coppola, *Apocalypse Now*), and contemplating the explosions from a distance.

There is another important issue that interweaves the film’s plot and that reinforces the darkness of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, namely the echo of colonialism, proposed by Ronald L. Bogue (613). It is important to mention that the film is based on Joseph Conrad’s novella *Heart of Darkness*, in which the action takes place in the nineteenth-century Africa. Although Coppola deals with the conflict that took place in Asia in the twentieth century, his version of *Heart of Darkness* arguably adopts the novella’s theme of colonialism, specifically in the restored scenes of Willard’s time with the family of French colonialists. Yet one can argue that the director uses the idea of colonialism metaphorically when discussing U.S. intervention in Vietnam. Coppola provides the spectators with the premises for the upcoming intrusion already at the beginning of his film: the close-ups of roast beef, shrimps, peas, and carrots that appear on

the dinner table when Willard is ordered to find Kurtz are used to convey an important message. I support the suspicion of Miriam Hansen who claims that the food loses its traditional meaning in this scene (126); the images should rather be perceived in their figurative sense, i.e., they provoke appetite, delight from something tasty, and desire to get more. The relish for food can be metaphorically interpreted as the relish for Vietnam. My argument is justified by the further actions that take place in *Apocalypse Now*: Willard's illegal journey up the river in Vietnam towards Cambodia. Yet it is not only Willard's presence that creates the atmosphere of invasion; the presence of the military on the territory of Vietnam in general intensifies the atmosphere of war, foregrounding the problem of colonialism and the domination of one people over the other one.

The invasion is also illustrated through the character of Kurtz. Kurtz lives in the jungle where he is worshipped by the native population who make up his army. He is fervently protected by these people who see him as their leader, tribal chief, king. Bogue draws attention to "Buddhist wisdom" (622) that Kurtz possesses, whereas I would like to go further and claim that even Kurtz's appearance is similar to the image of Buddha. Moreover, the house he inhabits reminds the viewers of an ancient Orient Temple. These speculations allow me to conclude that through the image of invader Kurtz—who not only plays an oracle, thus demonstrating his (American) superiority, but also literally assumes the role of God—*Apocalypse Now* reconstructs the idea of American divinity/exceptionalism. Yet this concept is rather equivocal in the context of the film where the supposedly "divine" character is, in principle, a renegade madman whom America has sent Willard to kill.

The ending of *Apocalypse Now* intensifies the duality of human nature. After having killed Kurtz, Willard stands firm above the inhabitants of the territory, holding a machete in one hand and Kurtz's papers in the other. The people surrender: with trepidation and awe they kneel down, accepting Willard as their new king. The scene is followed by an extreme close-up of Willard's face that—shockingly—resembles Kurtz's face: the audience does not see Willard's hair, which makes him look like a "new Buddha." Then, he turns his face so that one half of it is lit whereas the other half is in the shadow. This symbolizes good and evil as integral parts of Willard's nature, conflicting with each other. Unexpectedly, Willard goes downstairs and eventually leaves the jungle. This departure reminds the audience about the fact that the U.S. lost the war and eventually had to deal with the ramifications of the intervention, in particular, the moral ones.

2. Becoming a "Real Man" in *Full Metal Jacket*

Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* that was released in 1987 provoked different responses from audiences. For example, Tony Pipolo refers to critic Pauline Kael who claims that *Full Metal Jacket* is "probably [Kubrick's] worst film" ("The Modernist & the Misanthrope" 5). Christopher Sharrett calls *Full Metal Jacket* an "antidote to the reactionary and often nonsensical fare about the war produced by Hollywood in the past several years" and then continues that "*Full Metal Jacket* contains Kubrick's typically acid version, its total lack of sentimentality and

sardonic view of the military [...] There is much about his work that is politically troublesome, and little in this new film that challenges (or even addresses) popular assumptions about the debacle in Southeast Asia” (64). Zsolt Györi states that *Full Metal Jacket* is “a potentially more autonomous text than Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* or Oliver Stone’s *Platoon*” (151). Thomas Doherty makes an excellent observation that Kubrick’s film “exemplifies the Vietnam War film in its mature stage, a stage whose distinguishing quality is its reliance on cinematic, not historical, experience” (“Full Metal Genre” 24). Susan White claims that *Full Metal Jacket* was “marketed as a traditional war film, basking in the reflected glow of Kubrick’s ambiguous reputation as an eccentric genius” (204). Indeed, critics’ reactions to the film vary. However, the majority of scholars agree that in his film Kubrick does not only show an American becoming a man and a war hero but he also investigates the very process of this transformation.

Full Metal Jacket can be divided into two parts. In the first part, Kubrick shows how newcomers turn into men and real soldiers while being trained in Parris Island; the second part transfers its viewers to the Vietnam War that is set in Hue city. As Paula Willoquet-Maricondi argues, in the first part of the film, Kubrick shows us that the process of masculinization starts with the self. Gunnery Sergeant Hartman’s (R. Lee Ermey) main aim is not only to prepare the recruits for the war physically but also to “clear” (12) their selves so that they will be morally ready to fight. In other words, he wants them to become real marines: men who are both spiritually and physically strong. Greg Jenkins refers to the very beginning of the film, which is, literally, music only. Even before the credits appear, the audience hears the song, according to which “America has heard the bugle call” and later continues that “you know, it involves us one and all”: “[the] musical narrator says ‘hello’ to a place and an event that would destroy lives by the tens of thousands” (110-11). Hartman, therefore, prepares these young men for the war that most of them will not survive. Jenkins later refers to Terrence Rafferty, who argues that the first scene in the film, where recruits are having their heads shaved, can be compared to a preparation for a surgery: “Basic training is an operation on their brains” (111). Parris Island, therefore, represents a place where recruits get both physical and psychological training.

Willoquet-Maricondi compares the recruits to infants, thus suggesting that they are still far from being real men. First, with their heads shaven the recruits look like babies; second, in the scene where they wear white underwear and T-shirts they resemble babies in diapers; third, their beds that are always made tidily look like incubators. Through such images, Kubrick attempts to demonstrate that “these ‘babies’ are not yet fully ‘born’ into the World of War” (Willoquet-Maricondi 16).

The changing of the recruits’ identities starts with their renaming: the guy from Texas is called “Cowboy,” the black guy “Snowball,” the funny guy “Joker.” The recruits are constantly humiliated in the camp; they are often addressed to as “sweethearts,” “ladies,” and “homosexuals.” Yet, questioning the teaching methods in the camp, the audience doubtlessly wonders whether Hartman is serious or not and whether this is really how Marine sergeants behave or Kubrick just creates a “satiric stylization” (Naremore 12) where Hartman’s theatrical performance and his speech full of metaphors provoke nothing but laughter. As James Naremore

states, the film is somewhere between “realism and caricature,” whereas Hartman’s actions are “revolting, scary and funny at the same time” (12).

Kubrick portrays Hartman as a strict “father” of the recruits whose duty is to start the process of masculinization; this process will be completed by the recruits themselves when they are on the battlefield. Hartman teaches them what their mission will be (which is again part of their “reprogramming”): “to bring freedom and democracy to the rest of the world” (Willoquet-Maricondi 13). The man explains to them that their rifles are “the only pussy” (Kubrick, *Full Metal Jacket*) they will get, that is why they have to give it a female name and care for it. Finally, they are told to have a “war face” (Kubrick), which they are to rehearse throughout their training. Having a “war face” is apparently one of the main aspects in the process of building the soldiers’ masculinity. Hartman once orders Joker: “Lemme see your war face!” (Kubrick). Joker tries to show that he is a soldier, that he is able to make a wild face and yell at the same time; yet the image turns out to be comical because Joker’s discomfort with his new identity is visible. Sharrett points out that one of the major themes of this film is “the fate of men at the hands of other men” (64). At this stage the fate of the recruits is at the hands of Hartman, who has to turn them into “real men.”

However, this task becomes problematic for Hartman when he realizes that there is an outsider, whom he immediately renames Gomer Pyle. Pyle is overweight and clumsy. Yet Pyle is *the* character who illustrates the deadly transformation that the military can force a human to undergo. In the beginning, Pyle is mainly shown as a baby: he sucks his thumb and walks with his pants off; he is eating a doughnut, while all the others are doing press-ups; he even finds a metaphoric mother, whose role is performed by Joker as he teaches Pyle how to make his bed or how to disassemble his rifle. One night Pyle is beaten up by the other recruits, and it is on that night he is reborn. He now can shoot very well, his rifle has a name, and, most importantly, he got that “thousand-yard stare” that Hartman wanted them all to rehearse and that is “characteristic of marines, who have been in combat” (Willoquet-Maricondi 17).

The climax of the first part of *Full Metal Jacket* is the scene when Pyle places his loaded rifle into his mouth. Willoquet-Maricondi argues that this scene proves that “the masculinization process has run its course. The logic of this masculinization process is a suicidal logic. The truly ‘made’ man is a dead marine” (15). Moreover, Kubrick involves Joker and Hartman in this scene. When Joker sees that Pyle is not sleeping but sitting in the bathroom trying to commit suicide, he says: “Leonard, if Hartman comes in here and catches us we’ll both be in a world of shit” (Kubrick). Joker is clearly scared of Hartman, talking like a schoolboy who is scared of his instructor, whereas Pyle responds: “I am in a world of shit!” (Kubrick). The scene thus underscores the deadly nature of the transformation that soldiers might undergo once in the military or in war. This transformation is further illustrated when Leonard mercilessly shoots Hartman and later kills himself, too.

After Pyle’s suicide, Kubrick transfers the action to the “brutal and chaotic war in Vietnam;” thus the second part of the film begins (Conard 41). As has already been mentioned earlier, this

part is set in Hue city. Willoquet-Maricondi argues that the significance of this setting is twofold: on the one hand, instead of staging the war in the jungle, as it is represented in the majority of Vietnam War films, Kubrick chooses to portray an abandoned city, hence, demonstrating that this war, as well as any other, is “clearly a manmade environment” (7). Thus one can speculate that the military intervention in itself might be a manifestation of humanity’s addiction to war and violence.

Kubrick’s version of the Vietnam War does not exactly correspond to reality. The first part, for example, looks more like a battlefield because recruits have rifles, they shoot and have “war faces” (Kubrick). As the second part begins in Hue city, the first characters the audience sees are Rafterman (Kevyn Major Howard), whose gun is substituted with a camera, and Joker, who wears a peace symbol: as if Parris Island was some kind of a “passing nightmare,” “travel agency that organizes free trips to exotic countries” (Györi 161). Nevertheless, even if there is not “enough” action in the beginning—although, considering the ruins and destroyed buildings that are always included in the shot, one can hardly say that war ever stops in Kubrick’s film—later events and, precisely, the sniper incident, are filmed genuinely in the Vietnam War movie genre.

Attempting to visually portray U.S. military action against the Vietnamese, who are perceived as “effeminate” since they are both physically and technologically weaker than “hypermasculinized” and “hypertechnologized” American soldiers, the film implicitly tackles another important problem (Willoquet-Maricondi 12). Although the Vietnamese represent the enemy, there are a number of clues in the film that remind the audience about the delicate issues in American history, namely racism towards African Americans and Native Americans. Willoquet-Maricondi refers to John Winthrop’s myth about America as an ideal country, the model for all the others to accept (8). In *Full Metal Jacket*, Kubrick wants to demonstrate how the nation can repeat mistakes that have already been made in history: just like the European settlers having tried to impose a new culture on Native Americans, during the Vietnam War Americans attempted to accomplish a similar mission. The words of one of the officers aptly support my argument: “We are here to help the Vietnamese, because inside every gook there is an American trying to get out” (Kubrick). Moreover, this strong desire to “help” and unwillingness to understand that maybe this help is not needed are vividly reflected in the dialogue between Joker and Rafterman, when the latter wonders why the Vietnamese fight back if Americans *are only trying to help* them: “We are supposed to be helping them and they shit all over us” (Kubrick). Additionally, putting both a peace symbol and a helmet with a slogan “Born to Kill” on Joker (Kubrick), Kubrick makes a reference to the Peace Corps and the Special Forces. By having one person representing both entities, Kubrick does not only reveal the “duality” of a soldier, who has to choose between war and peace while in Vietnam, but he also demonstrates that no matter how contradictory the slogans and actions of American soldiers are, they all serve American interests. The paradox is that American soldiers come with good intentions to *help* the locals, though they were trained to *kill* (Willoquet-Maricondi 9-10).

In the final scene of the film, the soldiers are marching and singing the *Mickey Mouse Club* anthem. The Mickey Mouse Club anthem is clearly opposite to what would constitute warlike. It

was a song that virtually all American soldiers in Vietnam would have recognized from their own childhood—and recognized as a song of innocence and friendly fun. Thus its role in *Full Metal Jacket* is entirely ironic, a sign of the surreal disconnection of these young Americans from the combat environment on the other side of the world (a similar point is being made in the Playboy Bunnies sequence of *Apocalypse Now*). Juxtaposing a cartoon song with a real war, the director hints at the dual nature of humans as both innocent and evil.

The crucial scene both in the second part of the film and in *Full Metal Jacket* in general that deals with the problem of the soldier's inner duality and moral transformation is the sniper incident. The most intense moment takes place when the squad suffers heavy casualties from the attack of an unseen sniper. The soldiers are shot one by one but after the loss of Pvt. Cowboy (Arless Howard), Joker "tries to become a real warrior" (White 211). When the sniper is eventually wounded, the audience can clearly see how confused the soldiers are as they gather around the sniper and realize that it is a woman. Sabine Planka claims that presenting a female sniper, Kubrick displays "what becomes of this combination of weapon and woman which has been held up to the men as an ideal [in the training camp]" (60). The sniper scene serves two purposes. First, through it, Kubrick emphasizes the gender problem in the military, as women are frequently represented as weaker and less skillful soldiers than men; second, the scene is the finest moment for Joker to prove that he achieved masculinity and is now a real American marine. However, what the audience observes at the beginning of the scene is how hesitant and awkward Joker is. When he sees the sniper, his rifle seizes up and then literally jumps out of his hands. Nervously, he tries to grab his pistol: as a soldier, he looks both ridiculous and pathetic. If not for Rafterman, who manages to wound the enemy, Joker would have probably fallen victim to the female sniper. Later, the audience observes the woman lying on the ground, praying and asking the soldiers to shoot her. Many critics argue that the moment is very symbolic. Pipolo, for example, suggests that the sniper embodies Vietnam "as a country raped and pillaged by a series of Western nations" ("The Modernist & the Misanthrope" 13).

Soon the audience witnesses the soldiers deciding what to do with the dying sniper. Animal Mother wants to "let her rot" (Kubrick). "We can't just leave her here," says Joker, the camera focuses on him, showing both the helmet with the inscription "Born to Kill" and his peace symbol (Kubrick). Finally, Joker has to shoot the sniper in order to prove to the others that he also deserves to be called an "American soldier." The audience witnesses Joker's trembling face—he is in doubt and cannot decide whether to kill the sniper or not; the camera again focuses both on the inscription "Born to Kill" and the peace symbol. However, as soon as the shot is fired, the audience does not see the peace symbol anymore as it is hidden behind the collar; the camera moves down, revealing only the word "Kill" on the helmet (Kubrick). Symbolically, Kubrick shows that Joker has made his choice. Nevertheless, critics argue that Joker's actions can be interpreted in different ways. For instance, White considers the episode as nothing more than "a gesture of scapegoating" (212) that can often take place "within a military context" (215). Indeed, nobody expresses their willingness to shoot the sniper; on the contrary, the

soldiers incite Joker to do that in order to prove that he *can*. Pipolo states that Joker's kill (which is, significantly, his first kill) is "a mercy killing requested by the victim herself" ("Stanley Kubrick's History Lessons" 8). The scholar continues claiming that since it is an act of mercy, Joker "survived with his humanity intact in a 'world of shit' without surrendering to the death-giving nihilism of fellow Marine Animal Mother" (8). Yet, killing the sniper, "Joker proves he *is* a man, and in doing so, he legitimates his presence in the war" (Willoquet-Maricondi 6; emphasis in the original).

Conclusion

Full Metal Jacket provoked a lot of controversy since its release in the late 1980s. Today, the film draws the audience's attention as well, and not only because it was directed by the great Stanley Kubrick, but also because it was shot so beautifully: Kubrick brings both irony and sad truth into his work, creating a great film on Vietnam, "a compelling rhetorical emblem of a troubled time" (Jenkins 147). Establishing similarities between Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* and Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*, precisely, the way the films portray American involvement in Vietnam, one can notice that the directors deal with the Vietnam conflict from a rather unique perspective. In their surreal stories of U.S. intervention in Vietnam, Coppola and Kubrick explore human duality and the problem of moral transformation that individual soldiers experience during their military service. In doing so, the two filmmakers provide a distinct socio-cultural commentary on the role that the U.S. played in the Vietnam War, overtly portraying the actions of Americans as pernicious both to themselves and to their fellow human beings. Coppola and Kubrick thus shift the focus from war as a purely political event and display it as a force that destroys humanity not only physically but also psychologically and morally—indeed, the true horror of war, according to *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket*.

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